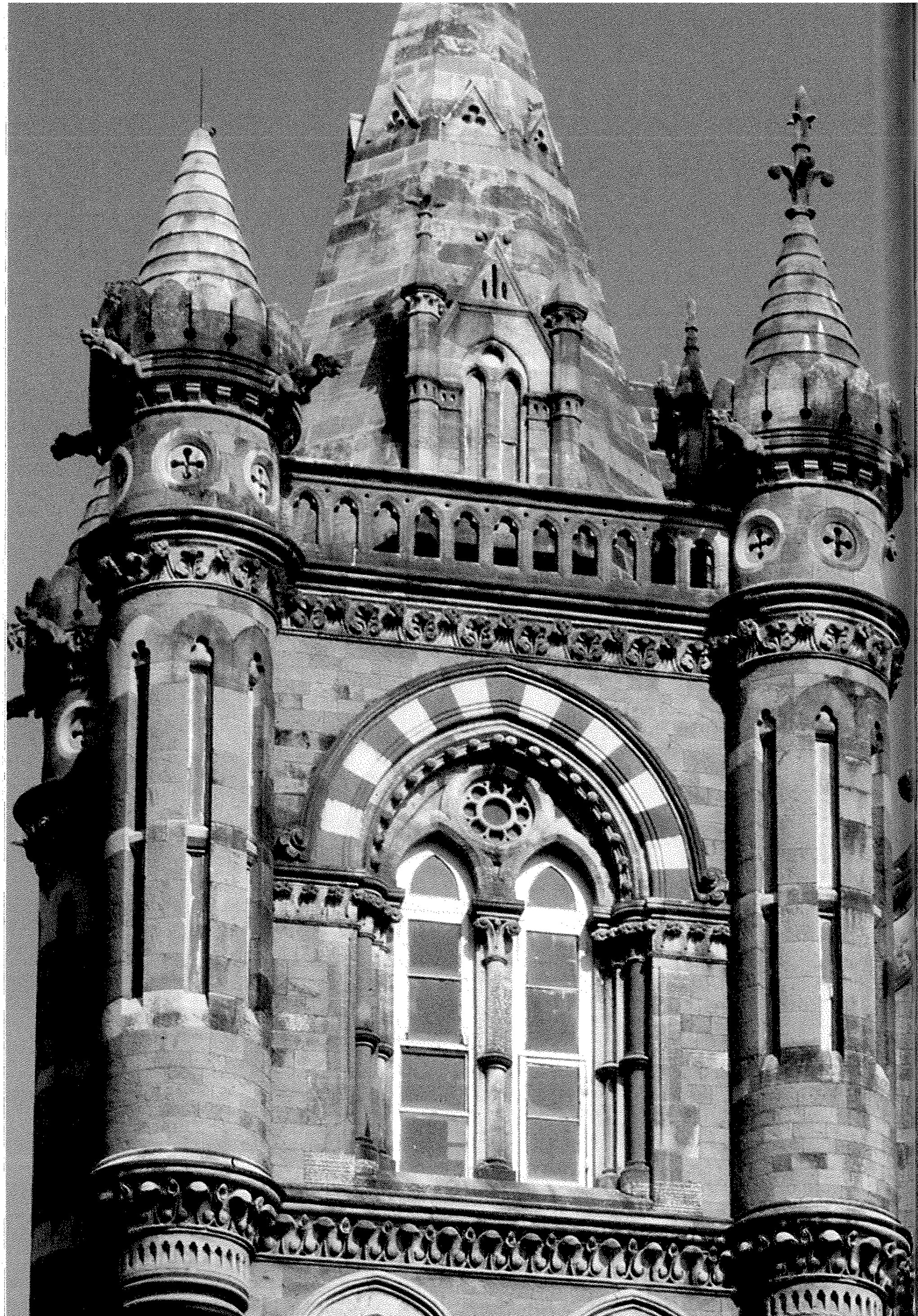
Part III

Colonial Art and Architecture (1757–1947)



Detail of 118

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The British Raj: Westernization and Nationalism

Profound changes took place in art and architecture during the colonial era. The introduction of European academic naturalism transformed all aspects of Indian art from working practices to the relationship between artists and their patrons. Despite the fascination Mughal and Rajput courts felt for European naturalism, its systematic introduction would not have been possible without an ambitious policy of dissemination devised by the Raj.

In 1757, a minor incident in Bengal was to change the course of world history. The Honourable East India Company gained control of the province after defeating the reigning Mughal viceroy. In less than a century, the modest English colony was transformed into a world empire. Unprecedented material prosperity emanating from the Industrial Revolution, scientific achievements, and the ideology of progress all contributed to a sense of cultural superiority that became the hallmark of the British empire. A traditional society such as India was no match for such an explosion of power and overflow of resources. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, the language of nationhood, a legacy of European Enlightenment, was internalized by the Indian intelligentsia to fashion their own weapon of resistance. The period is characterized by a dialectic between colonialism and nationalism and the construction of cultural difference in a rapid globalization of culture.

One of the most powerful impacts of the British Raj was on artistic taste. Victorian illusionistic art and the notion of artistic progress took firm roots in India, giving rise to new genres such as oil portraits, naturalistic landscapes, and academic nudes. Artistic individualism began to be prized by artists and patrons as art schools, art societies, and exhibitions provided the network for promoting academic art. At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, as the nationalist movement gathered force, it led artists to reassess the relationship between the western canon, hitherto taken to be universally valid, and pre-colonial taste that was being eroded with the rise of illusionistic art. In the 1920s, the advent of international modernism in India

The East India Company

In the fifteenth century the Portuguese set up fortified settlements in the East Indies in order to control the spice trade, followed by the Dutch, the French, and finally the English, who founded their East India Company in London in 1600. The decline of the Mughal empire, political instability, and victory in Bengal in 1757 gave the Company control over the north-eastern region of India, thus laying the foundations of the British Raj. By this time spices had been replaced by Indian textiles as the chief export. Gradually the British gained control over the subcontinent, introducing English education, law and order, and justice. The Industrial Revolution in Britain, which provided great resources, transformed the small trading outpost into a vast empire, eventually covering a large portion of the globe. In India modernization was facilitated by the introduction of print technology, the telegraph, and the railways. However, the Rebellion of 1857 convinced the British Parliament that the empire was too large for the Company to maintain effective control, leading to the assumption of power by the state and the declaration of Victoria as Queen Empress of India.

confused these issues further as primitivism and indigenism came to be closely identified in the new nationalist ideology of art.

Indian art of the Raj

The first sign of change was the loss of courtly patronage in India with the fall of the Indian powers in the late eighteenth century. This forced artists to compromise their work with inferior material and craftsmanship. However, not all such art was of low quality. Artists in Patna in Bihar and Murshidabad in West Bengal developed a clean, linear style that formed a bridge between earlier courtly art and later East India Company paintings.[1]

The East India Company employed artists for its wide-ranging economic surveys and documentation of natural history. British residents commissioned paintings of Indian flora and fauna from Indian artists who were trained in western techniques such as perspective, chiaroscuro, and the picturesque idiom popularized by the landscape artists Thomas and William Daniell [**110**].[2] The new rulers also engaged artists to produce ethnographic subjects, especially castes and professions, which enjoyed popularity during the Enlightenment. Among Company artists, Shaikh Mohammad Amir of Karraya was in demand for his elegant renderings of residences, carriages, domestic servants, pets, and other aspects of British life in Calcutta.[3]

The rise of Calcutta as a rapidly expanding urban centre drew village scroll painters (*patuas*) to the city. Although their 'pen-and-wash' paintings, sold at the pilgrim centre of Kalighat, did not interest the British or the Bengali elite, they were the first truly popular urban art in India. Sensing the growing demand, Kalighat *patuas* organized their production on a large scale with the assistance of female labour.[4] A more revolutionary development was the introduction of the techniques of mechanical reproduction. The woodblock and metal printmakers appropriated Kalighat imagery and plied their trade in

110 Sheikh Zayn al-Din
Stork, 1782.
Painted for Lady Impey, wife of the chief justice of Calcutta, Elijah Impey. Though indebted to European watercolours, the meticulous rendering of details by this Indian natural history painter reminds us more of the Mughal master Mansur.

close proximity to the vernacular printing presses that were springing up in Calcutta at the time, which by the end of the nineteenth century had become a staple of popular consumption, the most famous being the Calcutta Art Studio [**111**].[5]

As traditional art declined, the Indian rulers as well as the leading Indian elite turned to collecting western art and sitting for portraits by European artists. The Marble Palace in Calcutta, for instance, boasts a fascinating *mélange* of Victorian art. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the taste of the elite, and to some extent of the underclass, had become thoroughly Victorian. Yet a formal control of art education was not envisaged by the Raj until the 1850s. In 1854, the East India Company embarked on a project of improving Indian taste as part of its moral amelioration. Art schools and art societies, two key Victorian institutions, became the instrument for disseminating academic art, while the westernization project was overseen by the Director of Public Instruction. Initially art schools were set up in the three main colonial cities, Calcutta, Mumbai (Bombay), and Madras, to train artisans. Vigorous campaigns by Henry Cole, William Morris, George Birdwood, and other influential figures to save the Indian decorative arts had compelled the Raj to address their plight. Accepting that the Indian artisan had little to learn from the West in matters of taste, the

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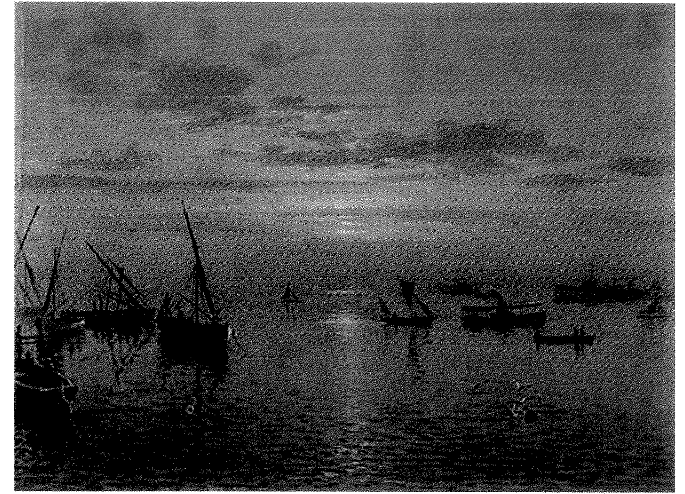
Courtesan Playing a Violin, colour lithograph based on Kalighat painting, nineteenth century.

Its radical simplification owes something to European prints. Kalighat artists cast a sardonic gaze on the contemporary social scene, their favourite subject being courtesans entertaining city fops or engaged in other activities. The printmakers found it convenient to appropriate the iconography of Kalighat, which prompted some of the Kalighat artists to take up printmaking.

government argued that he needed instruction in naturalist drawing to compete in the modern world. A uniform syllabus, based on that of the School of Industrial Arts at South Kensington, London, was devised for all the art schools. Unfortunately, artisans could not afford to attend school, nor did they take to academic art. The schools were subsequently flooded with boys from the English-literate social strata, as they inexorably turned into fine art institutions. Portrait painting was the most subscribed course, given that portraits had become a vogue among the Indian gentry.[6]

The profession of the artist

The advent of academic art was accompanied by a social revolution in India. In contrast to the earlier humble position of court artists, the



112 J. P. Gangooly

Evening, exhibited at the Bombay Art Society, 1910.

For his atmospheric landscapes of mountains, lakes, and different moods evoked by the river Ganges, the Bengali painter Jamini Prokash Gangooly (1870–1953) regularly won prizes at exhibitions throughout India. His highest accolade was to be decorated in the 1930s by King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy.

colonial artists enjoyed the elevated status of independent gentlemen, in part because they now hailed from the elite. The growth of art exhibitions, art journalism, and the rise of an art-conscious public changed the public's perception of art and the artist. However, while gaining freedom, they faced an uncertain economic future. Art societies, originally founded by British residents, became with the admission of Indians an instrument of Raj patronage. As an official put it, 'if a zeal and a genuine love of art were widely diffused among our wealthier Indian fellow subjects, a hugely favourable, lucrative and useful career would be opened to hundreds and hundreds of aspiring young men'.[7]

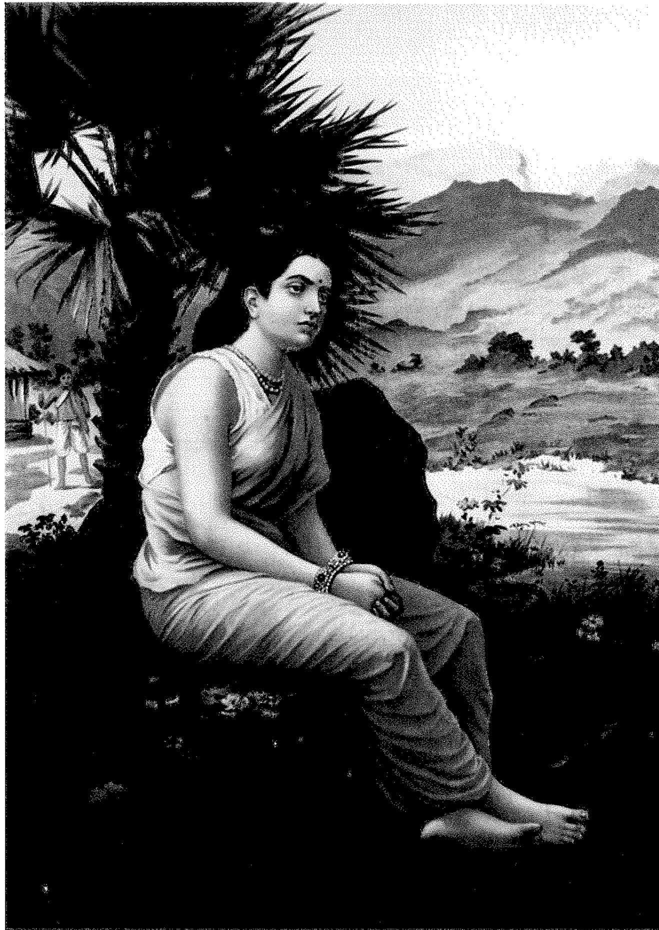
When Indian artists began showing at exhibitions organised by art societies, they were at first placed in the category of 'native artists'. But this segregation broke down under the influx of Indian participants. By the end of the century, a number of Indian women also took part in exhibitions. The careers of early salon artists such as Pestonji Bomanji, Manchershaw Pithawalla, and Annada Bagchi were launched at these shows. Among the subjects exhibited, landscapes were a novelty for Indian artists. Even though landscapes were mentioned in ancient literature, and Mughal paintings contained background landscapes, the objective study of natural scenery was a colonial phenomenon initially influenced by the English Picturesque movement [**112**].[8]

Gentleman artists

The most celebrated academic artist was Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), the first of the gentleman artists nourished by the Romantic image of

the artist as an uncompromising individualist. A member of the royal family of Travancore, Varma learned by watching European painters at work at the court. He entered the 'low' profession of painting against his family's objections, rising to be a fashionable portrait painter, prized as much by the Raj as by the Indian aristocracy. He exhibited widely and organised his studio with business-like efficiency, engaging agents for securing commissions and travelling the length and breadth of the country fulfilling them.

However, Varma's lasting fame rests on his history paintings, adapting Victorian salon art to bring to life ancient Indian epics and literary classics. The new canon of beauty—a mixture of Kerala and Guercino—created by him was greeted by the Indian nationalists as



113 Raja Ravi Varma
Sita Vanavasa, c.1890s.
This leading academic painter turned his history paintings into mass-produced oleographs, thereby appealing to all Indians, from the most exalted to the humblest. Even today, one comes across his voluptuous women reincarnated in cheap calendars and 'Bollywood' films (Bombay film studios gained this epithet for their popularity in the Third World).

endorsing their own literary 'inventions' of the past. Though Varma scrutinized black and white reproductions of Victorian art for inspiration, in the final analysis his paintings conjure up the atmosphere of Indian princely courts familiar to the artist [**113**].[9]

The Bengal School

Ravi Varma died a national celebrity in 1906. However, in a curious twist of fate, almost immediately after his death Varma's works were denounced as hybrid, undignified, and above all 'unspiritual'. Such a change of opinion resulted from the upsurge in nationalist sentiment in the second half of the nineteenth century, which fed on the potent myth of India's spirituality. The circle of cultural nationalists in Bengal led by the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) (better known simply as Tagore) reasserted their faith in Indian civilization, dismissed by colonial westernizers at the opening of the century. They discovered the Theosophists and other European enemies of Victorian materialism to be soulmates. This alliance between Indian and European critics of progress spearheaded debates on Indian identity—debates that closely mirrored developments in nationalist politics.[10]

To this set belonged the English art teacher Ernest Binfield Havell, an influential figure in the creation of nationalist art in India. In 1896, Havell came to head the art school in Calcutta, determined to direct the Indian youth towards their own heritage. A trenchant critic of Renaissance naturalism, Havell proclaimed that India's spirituality was reflected in its art, because India had repudiated such a materialist conception of art. The emerging indigenous (*swadeshi*) ideology of art demanded the creation of a style that would be in accord with Indian national aspirations.[11] Varma's imagining of the past was spurned by Havell and the nationalists precisely because it was 'tainted' with academic naturalism. Havell's first step in countering academic training at the art school was to acquire a fine collection of Mughal paintings for the benefit of the students; but when he introduced an Indian mode of teaching, his students went on strike. The nationalist press accused Havell of trying to deprive Bengalis of western art education, so deeply had western taste penetrated the province.[12]

In the midst of general hostility, Havell found an ally in the young artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), a nephew of the poet. The Tagores had been in the forefront of a cultural renaissance in Calcutta. Abanindranath had a liberal education at home, with freedom to develop his creative potential. Although he received instruction in academic art from an English art teacher, he found it to be incompatible with his own temperament. His search for an 'indigenous' style eventually led to his paintings on the divine lovers, Radha and Krsna, which introduced to the Bengali audience an alternative, emaciated ideal of feminine beauty. Used to the buxom

women of Ravi Varma, they were quite startled and vaguely dissatisfied. Although Abanindranath was already alienated from western art when he met Havell, it was Havell who introduced him to the delicate skills of the Mughal masters. *The Last Moments of Shah Jahan*, Abanindranath's first major work painted in a consciously Mughal manner, was an exercise in nationalist historicism. Yet ironically it was saturated with the melancholy spirit of Victorian art, its sombre mood coloured by the loss of the artist's little daughter.[13] This tentative exercise in the Mughal idiom failed to satisfy him, for he felt that the work lacked feeling (*bhava*), the quality he wanted to capture in art.

Abanindranath's search for a more appropriate style coincided with his meeting with Kakuzo Okakura Tenshin around 1900. The Japanese art critic had arrived in Calcutta to forge a pan-Asian alliance with the intellectual circle led by Tagore. In the late nineteenth century, the 'open door' policy had imposed westernization on a prostrate Japan. European academic art, which arrived in Japan as part of the westernization process, ousted indigenous art from popular esteem. The challenge to western values came at the turn of the century, from the cultural movement led by Okakura. The Japanese thinker, who recognized India as the ultimate source of the ancient Buddhist art of Japan, shared with Tagore an unswerving faith in the common destiny of Asia. One of the tenets of pan-Asianism was the contrast between Asian spirituality and European materialism, a romantic worldview in search of the roots of indigenous traditions and a form of cultural resistance to European colonialism. Western stereotypes such as 'the Oriental mind' were appropriated by pan-Asianists as a powerful focus for Asian resistance.[14]

Okakura's traditional (*nihonga*) art movement was realized in art by his pupils, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso. He arranged for them to work in Calcutta with Abanindranath, where they studied Indian art. Under Taikan's influence Abanindranath discarded the strong colours and hard outlines of Mughal painting in favour of the light brush strokes and delicate lines of Japanese art. With his wash technique Abanindranath produced atmospheric works in the spirit of Far Eastern art, some of which appeared in the art journal *The Studio* in 1905 and in Okakura's influential periodical, *Kokka*, in 1908.[15]

A few months prior to the nationalist unrest of 1905, Havell had brought Abanindranath to the Calcutta Art School to 'Indianize' art teaching with a select group of students who would rediscover 'the lost language of Indian art' [114]. Abanindranath, who led the Bengal School, the first art movement in India, aimed to create an 'oriental art' by assimilating different Asian cultures. The target of the Bengal School was academic art, which was branded as a colonial hybrid lacking 'authenticity', the prime example being Ravi Varma's work. Some

114 Abanindranath Tagore
Bharat Mata, c.1905.
The first major nationalist unrest broke out in October 1905, following the forced partition of Bengal by the Raj. This was spearheaded by two key demands, self-government (*swaraj*) and indigenous self-sufficiency (*swadeshi*). Abanindranath's political act was to paint the portrait of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*), personified as a Bengali lady holding four symbolic objects in the fashion of Hindu deities. However, the objects themselves were not conventional but emblems of nationalist aspiration: food, clothing, secular knowledge, and spiritual knowledge.

influential figures in Bengal and academic artists refused, however, to dismiss all academic art out of hand as being inimical to Indian cultural aspirations. An acrimonious battle of styles raged for years, throwing up writing of great vivacity.[16]

Muslim nationalism in art

By 1914, not only were the orientalists able to shake off opposition at home, they also won recognition abroad, with exhibitions in Paris and London in 1914, in Berlin in 1923, and again in London in 1924. At the last London exhibition, an English critic extolled the 'Indian artists' mission to the world'. The Germans, whose romantic attachment to India and their defeat in the First World War made them more sympathetic to the movement, described it as a powerful cultural struggle for redemption. An important aspect of the Bengal School was the merging of individual differences of style within a common vocabulary. But apart from the blend of Mughal and Far Eastern art, what held the movement together was the nationalist subject matter. Stories relating the past glories of the nation, themes exuding noble sentiments, and deep pathos were preferred. The vehicles for such noble themes were stooping emaciated figures, dripping with an aura of acute spirituality. An oppressive sense of loss was conveyed in these historicist works, a lamentation for the nation degenerating under a foreign yoke.

The *swadeshi* ideology of art, a reflection of militant Hindu nationalism, tended to privilege Hindu culture as the kernel of the Indian nation, thereby disinheriting other communities. Such developments created a feeling of unease among the Muslims. Abdur Rehman Chughtai (1897–1975), an outstanding Muslim painter from Lahore, represents the awakening of Muslim political and cultural identity in India partly in response to Hindu cultural nationalism [**115**].[17]

115 Abdur Rehman Chughtai
The Resting Place, c.1927.
Chughtai, who chose the *Rubayyat* of Omar Khayyam and other Muslim classics to construct his own historicist vision of the past, represents a cross-fertilization of cultures: as Beardsley and the Decadents drew upon eastern art, so Chughtai sought inspiration in the eastern elements of Art Nouveau. Chughtai's remarkable draughtsmanship was quickly recognized by the orientalists, who hailed him as one of their kind.

By the 1920s, academic art was in retreat in India. A new generation of artists in Calcutta tried to regroup under Hemen Mazumder, a painter of academic nudes, and Atul Bose, a fine draughtsman, while a group of landscape painters in Bombay continued to offer a challenge to the orientalists. However, both the westernizers and the orientalists were overtaken by events. Pan-Asianism was on the wane, as the differences among Asian intellectuals became irreconcilable. In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi launched his mass non-cooperation movement against the British empire, when political activism made any artistic contribution to nationalism rather problematic. But most of all the Bengal School was dealt a crushing blow by Cubism and other European avant-garde movements, which began to infiltrate Indian culture through books and journals.

Colonial architecture in India

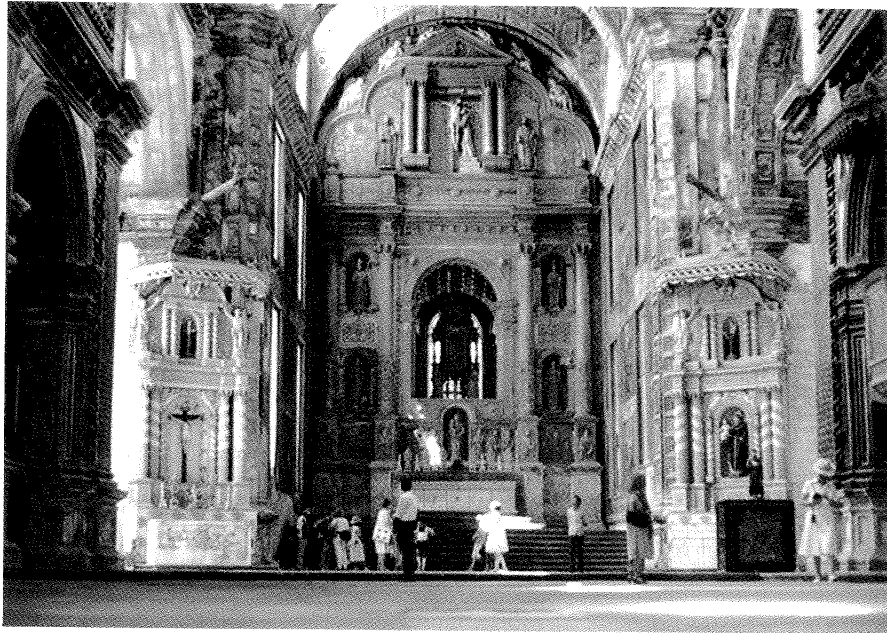
Colonial architecture profoundly altered the topography of urban India, though less so in rural India. The first signs of colonial transformation of Indian architecture are seen in the European architecture of successive Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and British settlements.

Religious architecture

The earliest Christian churches were built not by the colonizers but by Indian Christians in South India in the first few centuries after Christ (a little later the Jews built synagogues in India). Today, very little remains of these early endeavours. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese invited the dreaded Inquisition and the Jesuits to Goa for the consolidation of Christianity in the subcontinent. They also erected spectacular churches in the Mannerist and Baroque styles prevalent in the Iberian peninsula. The churches in Goa were a blend of *vastusastra* and Vignola, a tradition that is yet to be studied properly. The sixteenth-century Italian architect Jacopo Vignola's modular building system, imported by the Portuguese to India, was easily comprehended by the Indians, used to their own modular, the *vastu-purusa-mandala* [see **22**]. Furthermore, Indian designers must have felt at home with the rich drama of the Baroque church, its decorative impulse akin to the spirit of the Hindu temple [**116**].[18]

Secular architecture

Fortified settlements based on Renaissance central planning were some of the major secular structures introduced by the Portuguese in India. The English fortifications of the East India Company



116
Church of the Holy Spirit, nave and high altar, Goa, seventeenth century.
Among the major churches in Goa, the most striking ones are the Cathedral of St Catherine, the Church of Our Lady Divine, and this church. Its grand, airy conception—it has a central hall but no side aisles—focuses our attention on the high altar framed by a great round arch. The inspiration was Vignola's Il Gesù in Rome.

introduced the advanced plans of the French engineer Vauban, who turned city walls into artillery platforms and angled them mathematically to cover all lines of fire. Despite queries raised by architectural historians, Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were not centrally planned cities.[19] Unlike the Royal Ordinance of 1573 issued to the Spanish colonies, the British trading company was suspicious of any central planning that involved unnecessary expense. The streets were fairly regularly laid out. Modest churches and hospitals catered respectively to the spiritual and bodily needs of the European population. The paramount consideration was defence, while the governor's residence served as a symbol of authority. The building style used the Tuscan order, as prevailed in contemporary Britain. The port cities employed a sizeable Indian artisan population, which meant that the Indian and European communities were segregated in Black and White Towns. While the Company was suspicious of ostentation, private residents felt free to indulge their taste for opulence.[20]

With the victory over the Mughal governor Siraj-ud-Daula at Plassey in 1757 the British were able to venture out of the fortified port cities into the Indian countryside for the first time and gradually imposed their control over it. Interactions between Indian and western cultures produced architecture of great variety, ingenuity, and occasionally elegance, especially domestic architecture. Judged against the dominant western canon, Indo-British buildings were viewed as the 'unhappy bastards' of the colonial encounter. However, if one can renounce metropolitan standards and view them as products of a different context and experience, they repay careful study. Many of the imposing public buildings were constructed by East India Company engineers with the help of Indian builders. The inspiration was often European architectural texts, and there was always a time lag of around 20 years between the rise of a style in Britain and its introduction into India.[21]

After 1757, Fort William in Calcutta was redesigned as a massive fortification with the latest devices, but it lost its strategic importance as threats from rival colonial powers and Indian rulers in the subcontinent faded, leaving the British in almost total control. A renewed sense of insecurity, which surfaced during the Uprising of 1857, encouraged yet another conception of defence. Exclusive settlements inhabited by European civil and military officials, the cantonments, came into existence outside Indian towns. Within the cantonment, the army barracks were placed behind the open parade ground that could be used to train cannons at the enemy. These precautions were taken against a sudden insurrection by the native population.

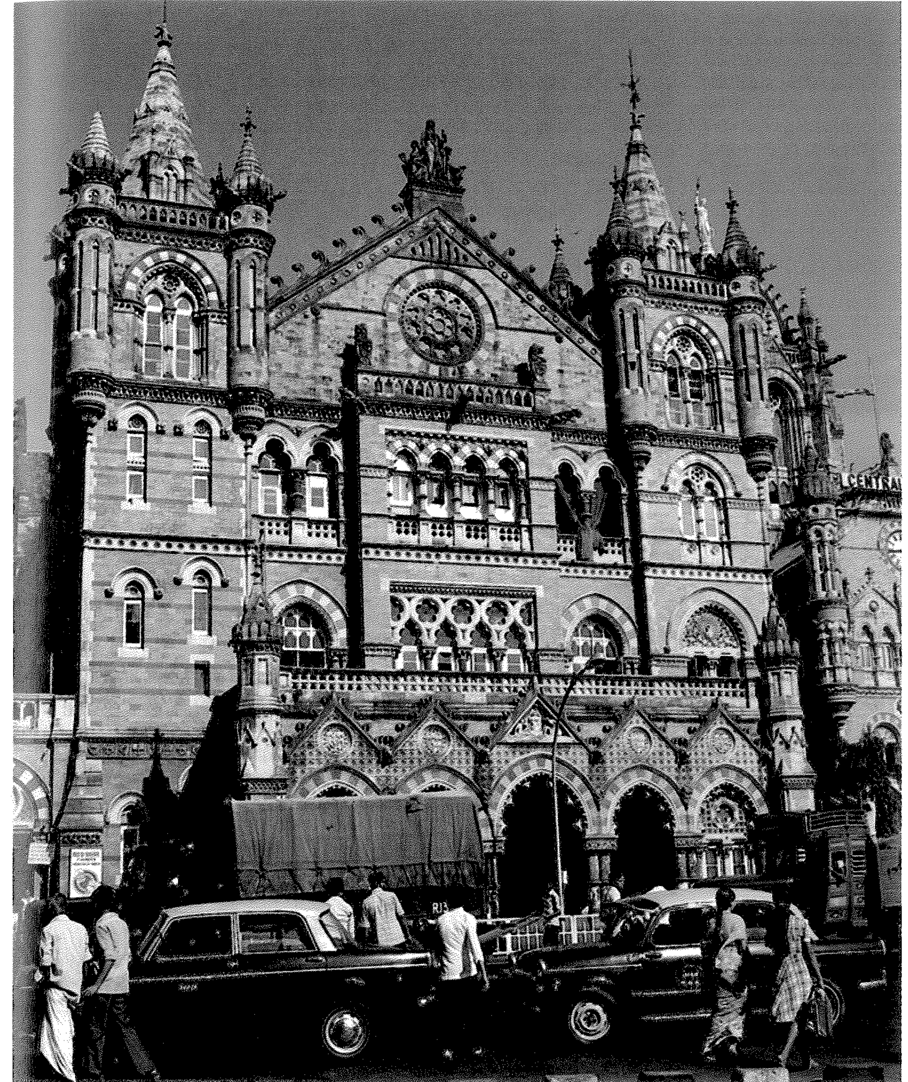
Indian Neoclassical architecture

The first public building of symbolic importance, the Neoclassical Government House in Calcutta, was modelled on the British stately home Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire.[22] The architecture of the colonial cities was motivated by the need to project an awe-inspiring image of the Raj. These buildings were also wish-fulfilments of colonial 'nabobs', who sought to recreate English stately homes in India. The Neoclassical style of these lavish residences was modified by the exigencies of climate and landscape, most notably in the use of shutters for windows. The sparkling white mansions (the *chunam* or quicklime white gave them the sheen) on the waterfronts of Calcutta and Madras were much admired by visiting Europeans: 'Viewed from the Hooghly, Calcutta has the appearance of a city of palaces. A row of large superb buildings ... produce a remarkable striking effect'.[23] The Indian 'merchant princes' of Calcutta, trading partners of the Company, followed suit with their impressive residences. What does not feature in books on colonial architecture is the fashion for Neoclassical architecture among urban Indians. The imposing Palladian mansion in Calcutta, the Marble Palace, is one example of the syncretic imagination lavished on this type of 'hybrid' domestic building. Many of these are being demolished to make room for high-rise buildings in response to the population explosion in Calcutta. But perhaps the most original contribution to colonial culture was the domestic bungalow, derived from the rustic Bengali hut, a cool, low-slung, single-storeyed, high-ceilinged residence perfectly adapted to the tropical climate.[24]

117 R. Chisholm and C. Mant
Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda, nineteenth century.
An example of a fascinating pastiche of European and Indian styles celebrating hybridity and exuberance is the Laxmi Vilas Palace at Baroda designed by the army engineer Major C. Mant.

The first Indian ruler to commission a Neoclassical building was Mir Jaffar, the puppet ruler of Bengal, who was placed on the throne by the English after Plassey. He engaged the East India Company engineer Duncan Macleod in 1825 to build the substantial palace in Murshidabad, inspired by Government House in Calcutta. European architecture was also adopted by the nawabs (rulers) of Lucknow. But they were 'blackmailed ... into creating European buildings, often to the direct advantage of the Company, who subsequently used them for their own purposes'.[25] And even their alliance with the East India Company did not spare the nawabs from destruction.

In the early nineteenth century, classical architecture was used to celebrate an empire held to be as enduring as that of Rome. This confidence was shaken by the Uprising of 1857, after which, abandoning aggressive anglicization, the Indian Raj turned to the notion of 'a timeless India', to be sheltered from the onslaught of western progress. Instead of reform and change, tradition and order became the dominant motto. Refashioning itself as the heir to the Mughal empire, the Raj opted for the Indo-Sarasenic style of architecture, especially for the palaces of the Indian nobility [**117**].[26] Ironically, as more and more Indian rulers were brought within the imperial fold after 1857, they increasingly succumbed to a western lifestyle, collecting European art objects and sitting for academic portraits. Hindu and Muslim forms were combined in many of the palaces of the Indian nobility, in which 'the two races remained distinct with the Hindu firmly subordinated'.[27] This was to underline the fact that only Raj paternalism was able to keep the peace in a land that 'lacked' cultural or national cohesion. During the Victorian era, revolutionary amenities such as the railways placed the Raj on a new footing in India, as exemplified by the sumptuous railway station in Mumbai [**118**].[28]



118
The Victoria Terminus, Mumbai (Bombay), nineteenth century.
This vast station in Mumbai, linking the west coast with north-east and central India, was in an early Gothic style with an Oriental feeling, an opulent Indian version of St Pancras Station in London.

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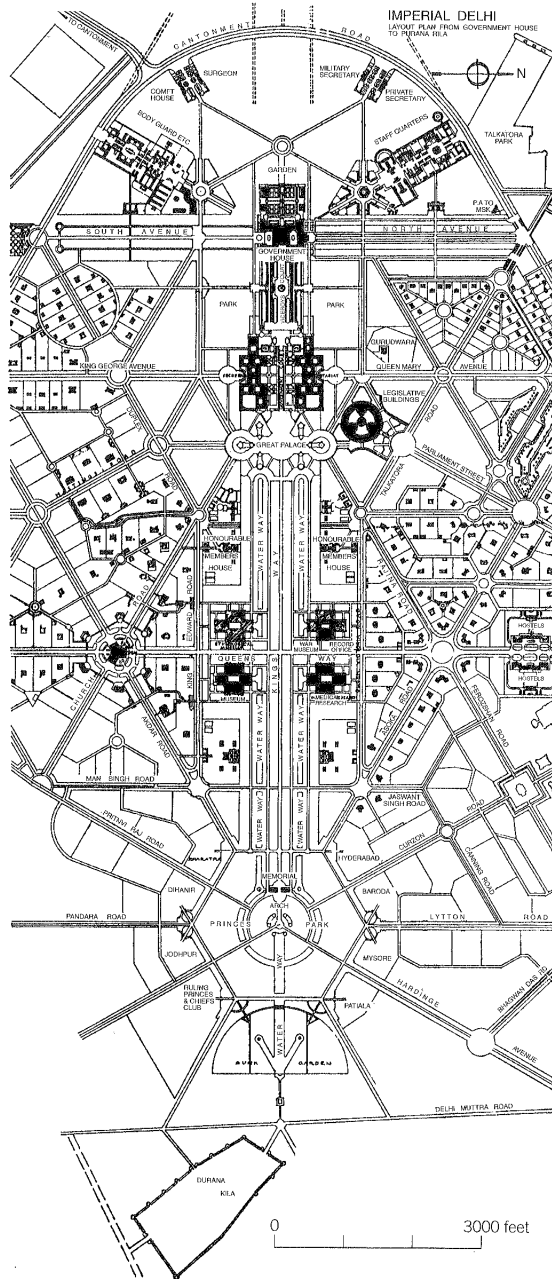
Plan of New Delhi.

As the administrative and ceremonial capital of the Raj, New Delhi sought to learn from other western capitals around the world. Its symmetrical geometry is dominated by the wide central axis used for grand processions, which starts from the viceroy's residence and then makes its way past the secretariat buildings and the circular council chamber. The planners wished to attain an axial symmetry that revealed a series of views as one moved around the city.



120 Edwin Lutyens

Viceroy's residence, New Delhi, *c*.1933.

Lutyens decided to employ 'Indic forms, rigorously controlled and subordinated within a European classical idiom, to express the imperial ideal', for this residence of the highest dignitary of the Raj.

The triumphalist ideology of the empire was expressed in official architecture such as the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta, conceived by the viceroy, Lord Curzon, as a fitting memorial to the queen. It is a classical edifice of white marble, with some Indian details.[29] The swan-song of imperial architecture was the new capital in Delhi, announced in 1911 to coincide with Edward VII's visit to India [**119**]. The removal of the Indian government from the colonial capital of Calcutta to Delhi, considered the heart of the indigenous empire, was a symbolic appeasement of the nationalists. It also enabled the Raj to extricate itself from the hotbed of seditious politics. To the pro-Indian officials, the choice of Indian, possibly Mughal, architecture would have narrowed the gulf between the Raj and its Indian subjects. But this was not to be. The appointment of Edwin Lutyens as the chief architect made the choice of a Neoclassical style for Delhi inevitable [**120**]. However, the imagination of his collaborator, Herbert Baker, was fired by the romance of empire as a partnership between the ruler and the ruled. He considerably diluted Lutyens' classicism in the Secretariat buildings designed by him.[30] It was also largely because of Baker that nationalist artists were commissioned to decorate his buildings with murals celebrating Indian culture, first in New Delhi and later in India House in London. It was ironic that, from the inception of New Delhi in 1911 to its actual completion in 1932, the political situation in India had reached such a crisis point that the capital remained the hollow seat of an empire in its final decades.

Detail of 121

Modernism in India

10

December 1922 is a convenient starting point for a discussion about the modernist art movement in India. At the end of 1922, through Rabindranath Tagore's intervention, an exhibition of the works of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Johannes Itten, and other Bauhaus artists was held in Calcutta.[1] This momentous event brought modernism right to the doorsteps of Bengal, though its impact was not immediately obvious. International modernism added an extra dimension to the earlier dialectic between colonial and indigenous art. The problematic relationship between global modernity and national identity was the dominant theme of Indian art through the twentieth century as indeed of arts of the Third World in general. Modernity, associated with western capitalism and colonial expansion, has involved international communication on an unprecedented scale, giving artists unlimited access to art from all ages and lands. The Industrial Revolution, which ushered in the modern age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, uprooted communities and undermined social cohesion. Fragmentation of life and art made intellectuals outsiders in their own society, causing alienation and angst, forcing a crisis of identity. These have become the cornerstones of modern art, formally expressed in radical distortion and fragmentation.

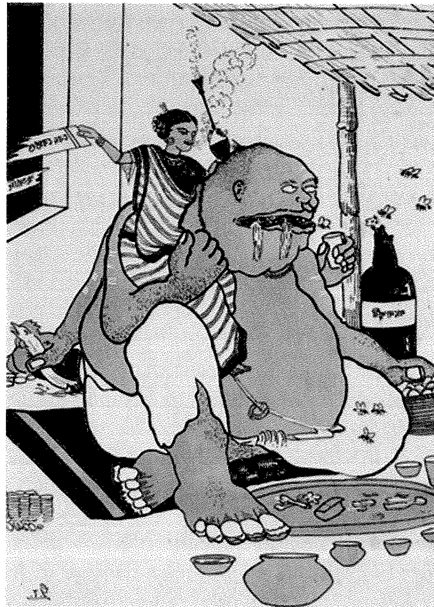
In the 1920s, India was still an essentially non-industrial country in which social cohesion had not yet broken down. While colonial rule gave rise to a crisis in cultural identity, this did not necessarily lead to the western sense of alienation of the self. Indeed nationalism—and nationalist art as represented by the Bengal School—was built on the real or imagined unity of all Indians, which could hardly encourage social alienation of the artist. As Indian artists were increasingly exposed to the European avant-garde from the 1920s, each artist responded to the above issues of modernism in their own way. But one problem they could not resolve was the contradiction between a modern sense of alienation and the cultural cohesion expected of a nation engaged in an anti-colonial struggle.

Indian artists and Cubism

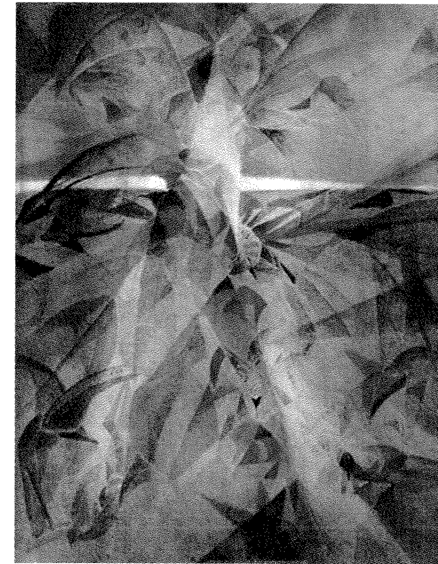
Art from the 1920s until 1947, the year of Indian independence, was dominated by three powerful personalities, the poet Tagore, Amrita

Sher-Gil, and Jamini Roy, all of whom responded to modernism in their own unique ways. However, the first Indian response to modernism was a fascination with Cubism, which had become the most widely emulated artistic style in the world. The pioneering figure in this context was Abanindranath Tagore's brother, Gaganendranath (1867–1938), who came to prominence in 1917 with a series of cartoon lithographs. Since the 1870s in Bengal, caricature had been a prime device in art and literature for exposing pretension and mocking contemporary manners. The satirical tradition continued into the twentieth century, but few matched the unsentimental eye of Gaganendranath [**121**].[2]

In the 1920s, Gaganendranath's discovery of Cubism released an unprecedented creative energy in the artist [**122**].[3] In order to grasp the nature of Gaganendranath's appropriation, we need to compare it with the reception of Cubism in European countries other than France. But first let us remind ourselves of Cubism's contribution to modern art. European painters since Giotto had related different objects within a picture by means of consistent, directional lighting. The unique importance of Analytical Cubism (the Braque-Picasso experiment of 1909–10) rests on the fact that it finally destroyed the pictorial illusionism created by 'directional lighting'. This was achieved by setting up conflicting relationships of light and shadow 'within' a picture frame, thereby dissolving the solidity of an object.[4]



121 Gaganendranath Tagore
Dhanyeswari, lithograph, *c.*1918.
His ferocious social cartoons pilloried double standards, cant, and hypocrisy. The Brahmin pays lip service to religious duties, while indulging in prohibited food, alcohol, and whores. The bold lines and large, flat colour areas in his cartoon lithographs are reminiscent of the cartoonists in the German satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*.



122 Gaganendranath Tagore
Poet Rabindranath on the Island of Birds, 1920s.
This work, inspired by Cubism, conjures up a fairy-tale world and demonstrates how a particular idiom from another tradition can be transformed by a modern artist in the light of his own cultural experience. The fairy tale makes a playful reference to his uncle Rabindranath Tagore.

Significantly, these revolutionary implications of Cubism did not affect German expressionists such as Georg Grosz, for instance, as much as Cubism's decorative possibilities, namely that objects could be distorted and fragmented at will to create dazzling patterns. To Gaganendranath, who was remote from the European scene, the decorative possibilities of Cubism, with its broken surfaces and the play of light and shadow, proved to be the most gripping. These later works, including Gaganendranath's flights of poetic fancy, may be termed 'post-Cubist', both to indicate the source and its transformations. Indeed, a German critic at an exhibition of modern Indian art in Berlin in 1923 quite perceptively spotted this affinity between the Indian artist and the Expressionists. The complex patterns developed by Gaganendranath in his later painting derived also from his use of a kaleidoscope, a contraption that fascinated him.[5]

Primitivism and Indian art

The second development in Indian modernism needs to take into account another global phenomenon with its roots in the history of western thought: primitivism.[6] In the late nineteenth century, the nationalist art fairs in Bengal gave the decorative arts the recognition they deserved. But it was Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha movement that for the first time brought the vast rural population of India into the orbit of the anti-colonial struggle (Gandhi, however, did not directly address the tribal peoples in India). The Gandhian movement gave a new voice to the peasant and forced the urban elite to accept that

Primitivism

Primitivism has existed in the West since antiquity as the romantic longing of a complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence, the innocence of the 'noble savage'. The crisis of the industrial age, blamed on the Enlightenment ideology of progress, made the idea of primitivism attractive to many thinkers. Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* is a classic primitivist document of the twentieth century. His notion of the unconscious accorded a special status to the subliminal level in the human psyche that lies submerged beneath our rational self. The idea of the 'internal savage' was complemented by that of the 'pre-rational', primitive mentality, put forward by Lévy-Bruhl and other anthropologists. This vestigial Darwinism characterized primitive society as the childhood of mankind on the scale of progress, contrasting the rational (western) man with the 'Other': primitives, women, children, and the mentally ill. The myth of the *naïveté* of primitive art, although it belied the fact that strict rules governed such works, liberated European artists from the constraints of the classical canon. Primitivism assumed a global status as modernism spread around the world.

Indian society was predominantly rural.[7] In the first phase, artistic nationalism had identified the nation with the past; from the 1920s, it began equating the nation with the soil. This was the time when educated Bengalis discovered Kalighat painting and the village scroll painting (*pat*).

The creation of the 'noble savage'

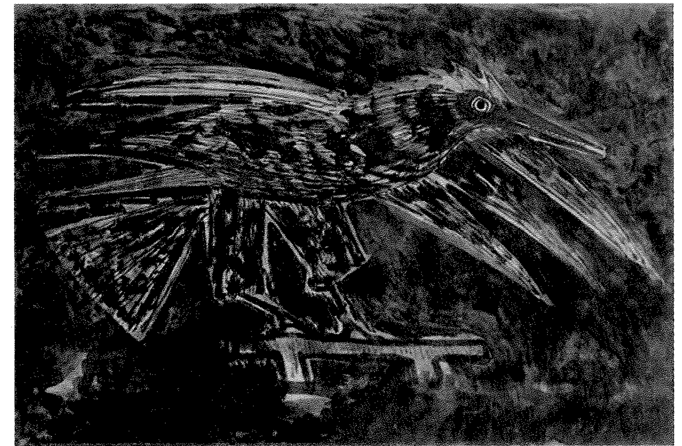
However, from the 1920s it was the Santhals, hunter-gatherers of eastern India, who emerged as the ideal 'noble savage' in Bengali consciousness. This stereotyped image of 'primitive' groups in India had already been created by colonial anthropology.[8] Santhal women were romanticized by the Bengal School, but in the university founded by Tagore at Santiniketan, Santhals or *adibasis* (original inhabitants of India) came to stand for the timeless purity of the primitive, set against the corruption of civilization.[9] This paved the way for the admiration of tribal art by the elite, who discovered its affinities with European modernist works.

The quest for rural (and tribal) art as an expression of indigenous resistance to colonialism became a significant aspect of modern art in India. However, in the interactions between elite and folk/popular/tribal artists, despite the undoubtedly idealistic objective, an asymmetrical relationship between them was inevitable. For instance, the elite artist could with all sincerity participate in folk lives in order to gain an insight into folk art, but the reverse was virtually impossible. This underlying tension of our modern age has never been resolved.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

The first major modern painter in India, who made primitivism a vehicle for his artistic expression, the great poet Rabindranath Tagore was also the first Indian to make an effective use of bold 'expressionist' distortions in his painting. Tagore took up painting somewhat playfully at 67, when his international reputation as a poet was at its zenith. The first exhibition of Tagore's paintings took place in May 1930 at the Galerie Pigalle in Paris. Henri Bidou, the champion of the Surrealists, drew clear analogies between Tagore's 'automatic painting' and the work of the Surrealists. Similarly, in Germany, where Tagore was a legendary figure, a reviewer commented on his work, 'How necessary it was for the revival of imagination to descend to the depth from where life comes, so as to be rid of the awful routine of illusionism. They are interesting because they show that ... between these Indian abstractions and the modern European ones there is an association of ideas.'[10] Tagore's paintings made a considerable stir in European intellectual circles, which can be partly attributed to his legendary reputation. But importantly, Europeans, already attuned to the poetic licence of Paul Klee and Max Ernst, did not fail to respond to the sheer power of his radical imagination.

Tagore's affinity with the European avant-garde was not a form of emulation but simply a parallel approach to artistic primitivism. There are several crucial aspects to Tagore's paintings that display his unmistakably personal style. Tagore's paintings originated in his game of creating shapes out of crossed-out texts, his 'erasures'. On the drafts of his writings, he often experimented with the Bengali script and the visual effects of different page designs. Tagore, along with the Bengali intelligentsia, was fascinated with the innovative combinations of text and image developed by Art Nouveau and Jugendstil illustrators, especially by Adolf Hölzel. Secondly, his 'erasures', produced with pen and ink and wash within a limited range of colours, began to take on human and animal shapes. They demonstrated his interest in the totemic art of the North American west coast Haida people and of Oceania [**123**].[11]



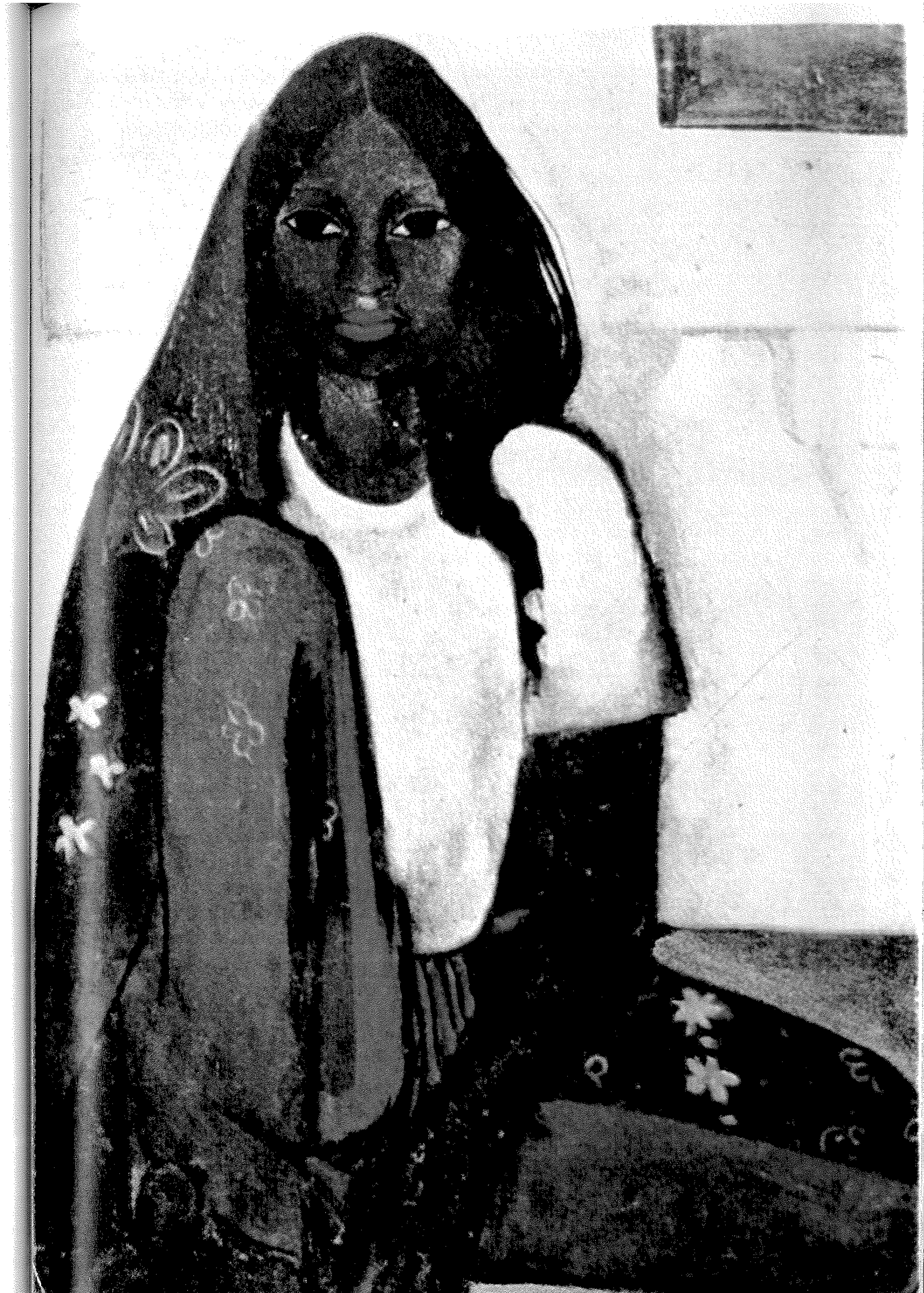
123 Rabindranath Tagore
Bird, *c.*1930.
Tagore's most striking creations were mask-like faces, some in profile, some frontally treated, hieratically simple, expressionless, like primitive masks. Tagore's faces concentrate on the 'unbeautiful, and on raw emotions', in a rejection of naturalism. The other striking subjects are birds and a variety of antediluvian monsters, sometimes reptilian, other times canine, that seem to lurk in the depths of the primal forest.

Among Tagore's primitivist imagery gathered from around the world, there is, interestingly enough, none from India, even though he was drawn to the simple lives of the Santhals in Bengal. What we must remember is that tribal art was not yet widely known in India. Freud, who had offered a new insight into automatic drawing, children's art, and naive art, gave European Expressionists and Surrealists a weapon to combat the academic canon. As with the European avant-garde, Tagore's primitivism sprang from an inner psychological need. This is where Tagore's painting differed from the bulk of his literature, in which his style was Olympian and formal, seldom plumbing the unconscious. In his late years, he sought escape from the formal conventions of literature into a personal, erotic, and enigmatic language of art.[12] Tagore found the Bengal School unacceptably parochial and sought refuge in what he regarded as the universal in art.[13] His direct and untutored approach made him the most radical painter in India and an inspiration to the younger generation.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41)

The second major figure in Indian modernism was the legendary Amrita Sher-Gil, the first professional woman artist in India, who died tragically young. Sher-Gil was born in Budapest in 1913 to a Sikh nobleman and a cultivated Hungarian-Jewish musician. In 1934, Amrita returned to India after training in Paris, declaring with youthful impetuosity that she wished to see the art of India break away and produce something vital connected with the soil, yet essentially Indian. Sher-Gil's primitivist longings were first kindled by Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. She declared her artistic mission to be the interpretation of the lives of poor, mute, unsung Indians, 'the silent images of infinite submission ... angular brown bodies strangely beautiful in their ugliness'.[14] Apart from her well-known Gauguinesque paintings, she also produced a thick 'textural' style related to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, which had influenced Hungarian artists. She came to adopt the style on her visits to Hungary, where she met a number of artists. Sher-Gil had commenced yet another style with dramatic colours and flat shapes but this was cut short by her sudden death. In her works, what comes across is her instinctive sympathy for women, as in *The Child Bride* [**124**].

Paradoxically, it was not her painting style, which was less radical than Tagore's, but her vital personality that marked her out as the quintessential modern artist as an alienated outsider. With her mixed parentage, she embodied the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the modern concepts of ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural 'purity'. Unconventional and brash yet vulnerable, she shared with many gifted people a voracious sexual appetite that outraged her contemporaries. She had a series of bisexual affairs and her feelings for men were



124 Amrita Sher-Gil
The Child Bride, 1936.
As early as 1925, Sher-Gil had entered in her diary: 'Poor little bride, she did look forlorn as she sat in a lonely corner [surrounded by ladies in gorgeous robes] ... there was an expression of weariness in the [bride's] liquid eyes. She seemed to guess the cruel fate [awaiting her].' In 1936 she appears to have realized this incident in this moving study.

ambivalent. One of her lovers, the English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, described her as a 'mixture of rose water and methylated spirit'. In the final analysis, she represents the emancipated woman whose work takes precedence over everything else, a professional woman in a world of men.[15]

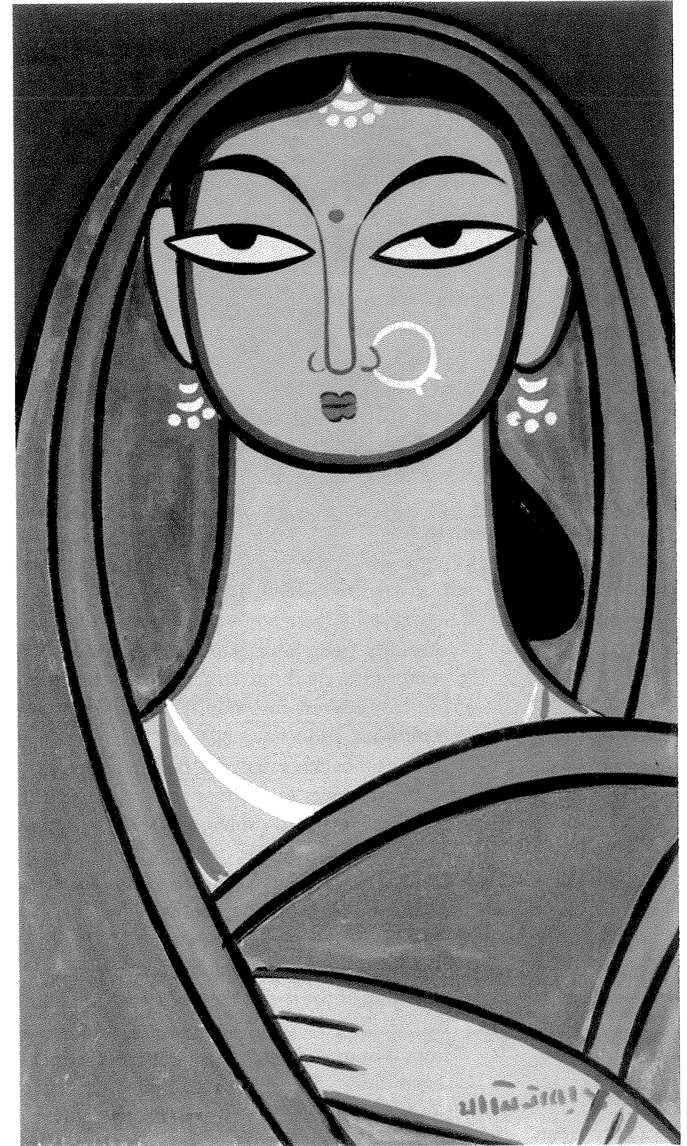
Jamini Roy (1887–1974)

The third leading modernist before 1947 was Jamini Roy, whose primitivism made a consistent ideological statement. Whereas works produced in Santiniketan and by Sher-Gil idealized the 'children of the soil', Roy took these ideas to their logical conclusion. A member of the landed gentry, Roy received his training at the Calcutta Art School. In his early career, Roy searched for an 'authentic' national expression in art, flirting with an array of styles from both East and West, ranging from academic naturalism and Impressionism to orientalism and Chinese wash painting. The process by which he eventually discovered the style that fulfilled his spiritual and intellectual needs was slow. It was attended with a spiritual crisis at one point, when he questioned the very need for painting. After seeking inspiration in the art of Kalighat, Roy turned to rural India, to the Santhals, who were already being romanticized by the Bengali nationalists, and finally to the scroll paintings of his own village in the Bankura district of West Bengal. By the end of an exciting voyage of discovery he was creating bold and simple works that were marked by a fresh vision of traditional Bengal [**125**].[16]

Roy's achievements as a nationalist artist must be set against his own definition of indigenous art. Firstly, he was convinced that genuine indigenous art could not be produced with foreign commercial pigments. With this in mind, he gave up oil painting, turning to indigenous earth colours and organic pigments. Secondly, Roy ultimately rejected Kalighat in favour of village scroll painting because he found the former to be too closely associated with the urban and colonial milieu of Calcutta. His indigenism sprang from a social commitment to art. Renouncing artistic individualism, a sine qua non of colonial art, he sought to make his workshop anonymous, deliberately subverting the 'aura' of authenticity of an elitist painting by producing collaborative works and refusing to sign them.[17]

Developments in art on the eve of Independence

The strong undercurrent of romantic primitivism was not confined to the three leading figures. From the 1930s, it radicalized art with its stress on rural art at Tagore's 'holistic' Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan. Nandalal Bose, an influential teacher at Santiniketan and a leading member of the Bengal School, gave up historicism in favour of traditional village art, encouraging students to commune



125 Jamini Roy
A Woman, 1940s.
Roy brings to perfection his quest for a style that combines the bold lines of modernism with the folk scroll paintings (*pat*) of Bengal. Roy's great reputation as a painter rests on his process of simplification, the ruthless paring down of unnecessary details to get at the essential form, culminating in a few bold lines and colours.

directly with nature. However, he was eclectic in drawing upon both western and eastern art. But above all, for Nandalal, only the primitive Santhals had retained the sense of humanity that had been lost with colonial rule. Nandalal's innovative teaching was given a radical twist by his pupil Binode Bihari Mukherjee: 'In his mural based on the lives

126 Ramkinkar Baij
Santhal Family, 1938.
One of the famous sculptural groups that idealizes the 'primitive' Santhals, shown here as heroic figures in this radical departure from academic sculptural tradition.

of saints (who were significantly peasants and artisans) Mukherjee works out a rhythmic structure to comprehend the dynamic of Indian life ... between community and dissent. A radical consciousness of traditional India is visualised'.[18] Ramkinkar Baij, the leading sculptor at Santiniketan, created a heroic image of the Santhals, injecting a new robustness to outdoor sculptures with the use of unconventional materials such as rubble, cement, and concrete [**126**]. This was a significant departure, because the major sculptor before him, Debiprosad Raychaudhury, had produced monumental sculptures on patriotic themes, but these were confined to bronze and other more conventional materials.

The second development on the eve of Independence was the widening of the social horizon of artists, a number of whom, including two leading Bombay artists, M. F. Husain and K. H. Ara, came from a humble background. Although this widening brought in new sensibilities, these artists, despite their non-elite origins, did not produce artisanal works. They joined the colonial-modernist artistic milieu, governed by the rules of the market and an urban artist–patron relationship. Above all, their individualistic outlook was quite different from that of the village potter, for instance. The desire of many of the artists of this period, from both elite and non-elite backgrounds, to return to rural roots did not make their art less genuine; it is simply that their works were different from the art of the traditional village

craftsman or -woman. These contradictory and at times irreconcilable tensions—cosmopolitan versus nationalist, urban versus rural—gave a certain urgency to the works of modern artists in India.

During the closing decade of the colonial era, art and literature moved towards greater social commitment, in sympathy with the burgeoning socialist movements in the country. This was reflected in the 'progressive art' groups that sprang up in various parts of India that strongly rejected artistic nationalism in favour of social justice and equality. Progressive artists were self-confessed modernists pitted against the 'dead wood' of tradition, their idols Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-Gil, and Tagore and their target the 'historicist' Bengal School. They established close links with Marxist intellectuals, especially the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the Progressive Writers groups. The earliest Progressive Artists Group was formed in Calcutta in 1945, in the shadow of the Bengal famine of 1943. Its members included the sculptor Pradosh Das Gupta and the painters Paritosh Sen, Gopal Ghose, Nirode Mazumder, Subho Tagore, and Zainul Abedin. Among them, Abedin became renowned for some of the most haunting sketches of the great famine. The first artists' commune in India was established in the village of Cholamandalam near Madras. Of these various initiatives, the Bombay Progressive Artists Group has been the most influential. The impact of these new ideas was to be felt in the decades following Independence.